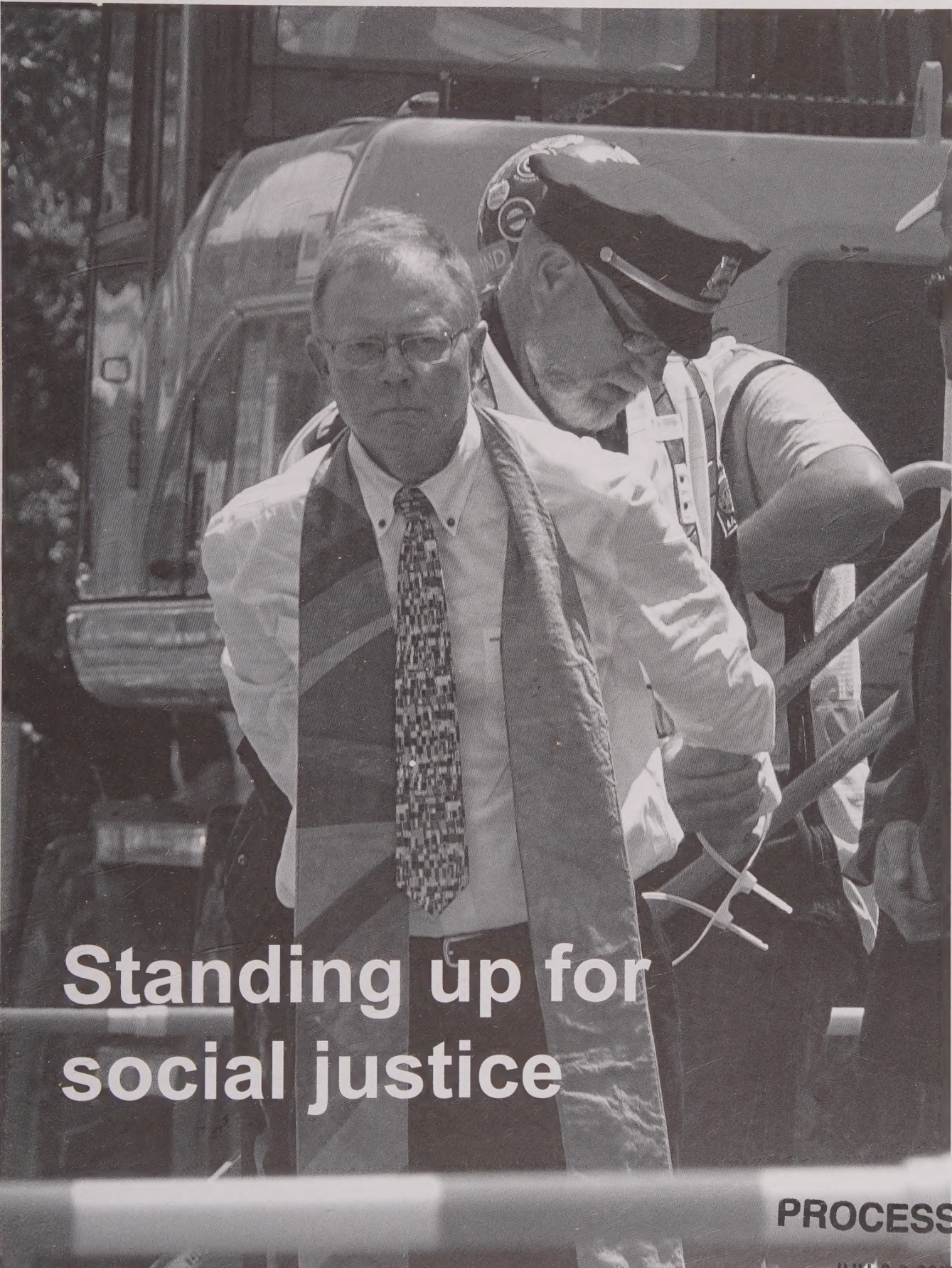


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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7940 2 June 2018



**Standing up for  
social justice**

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER  
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The Inquirer is the oldest  
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**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches, 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

I rise in the morning torn between the desire  
To save the world or to savour it—to serve life or to  
enjoy it;  
To savour the sweet taste of my own joy  
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbour;  
God of justice, if such there be,  
Take from me the burden of my question.  
No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears  
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;  
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.  
What is that you say?  
To save, one must serve?  
To savour, one must save?

The one will not stand without the other?  
Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself,  
In my concern for my own life  
I had forgotten.

— Richard S. Gilbert

## Making trouble in a good cause

Putting together my first issue of *The Inquirer*, as guest editor, has been great fun. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed editing it. I want to express huge thanks to Charlie Watson of Singular Publishing in Norwich, who has actually done most of the work, laying out and designing the pages with the raw copy I have sent him. Matt Carmichael's John Relly Beard lecture, 'Rekindling the Spirit of Community', started with a story of community coming together to prevent the building of a motorway. Due to space restrictions, I had to omit this opening story about social activism from the print version of the lecture in *The Inquirer*, but it made me wonder how much social activism work is going on amongst our congregations. We have a proud tradition of standing up for the oppressed and the disenfranchised. Unitarians were prominent in campaigning for women's suffrage (Essex Hall hosting many public meetings) and the abolition of slavery. More recently many Unitarians campaigned vociferously for the introduction of equal marriage rights for same sex couples.

I put out a call to fellow ministers asking if their congregations are currently involved in campaigning work around particular causes and, disappointingly, didn't get much response. I did glean an article about some excellent community organising being done by New Unity in London, but as yet have not heard about much current placard waving, or of Unitarians chaining themselves to lampposts in support of a worthy cause. Please do let me know if I have missed something.

I knew, however, where to go amongst our transatlantic co-religionists. I spent my first year of ministry as acting assistant minister at First Parish (Unitarian Universalist) in Bedford, Massachusetts, under the guidance of senior minister Rev John Gibbons. First Parish has a proud history of being trouble-makers in a good cause and I hope many of us will be inspired to do likewise by John's article in this issue. The front cover shows John being arrested for making trouble at a controversial pipeline protest.

— Maud Robinson



# A journey towards social activism

The seeds of Matt Carmichael's commitment to social justice were sown in his teenage years, when his father gave him a copy of Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*.

The John Relly Beard lecture at the 2018 Unitarian Annual Meetings was delivered by Matt Carmichael and was very well received. Using story and philosophy Matt encouraged Unitarians to reach out with social activism, underpinned by the supports of soil, soul and society. He hinted at some of his own experience of being a social activist and as an introduction to the first instalment of his lecture, which will be printed in three parts, the editor invited Matt to tell readers some more about his own background as a social activist.

Matt Carmichael spent the first five years of his life in Tanzania, the son of medical missionaries and this early experience imprinted some deep attitudes which would later feed into his strong calling to work for social justice: he had seen extreme poverty; the difference between black and white meant nothing to him; and he had experienced the world through a different language, Kiswahili. His parents don't always completely understand Matt's life passion for social activism, but they were responsible for planting the seeds; his father gave him a copy of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* when he was a teenager!

## Liberation and loss

Matt was raised within the evangelical tradition of the Church of England, but as a teenager started to attend a Baptist church, as they had better provision for youth, and by the age of seventeen he was preaching on the Baptist circuit. He was a member of Youth for Christ, a conservative organisation involved in setting up youth clubs and evangelising. He went to the University of Durham to study theology and was serving on the executive of the local Evangelical Christian Union when they created a post to organise social action. He was shocked to hear that the national governing body threatened to disaffiliate their local union for such an action, because their remit was for evangelism and not social action. He was further disenchanted by the very right wing political attitudes he experienced within evangelical Christianity, in particular by the refusal to accept gay and lesbian people within the church. By the end of university he had laid down his Christian faith, without an awareness of any alternative, which he experienced both as liberation and loss.

At this time he was drawn into social activism around environmental issues and international economic justice. He became involved in the protest of 1996 when eco-warriors tried to prevent the clearing of 10,000 mature trees for the building of the Newbury bypass. He was involved in Reclaim the Streets demonstrations in Leeds and Newcastle, organising street parties to highlight that the city streets belong to everybody and not just to commerce. He was involved in protest at the G8 summit in Birmingham in 1998, where he saw riots and the use of tear gas and witnessed the way a crowd can influence the thinking of an individual. He got involved with



an activist organisation in Leeds called Tidal, with whom he helped to successfully lobby the city council to commit to 40 per cent carbon cuts across the city by 2020.

Working as an English and drama teacher during the school year, Matt spend summers on activism work, including at climate camps at Heathrow Airport and at Kingsnorth in Kent. At Kingsnorth the protest was against a coal-fired power station and although there were direct actions, including trespassing and bringing down of fences, the organisers set up affinity groups to allow a variety of people to get involved at whatever level they felt comfortable.

## Living with an open heart

During this time Matt was living in a social housing community, managed by the tenants. He was exploring Tai Chi and Buddhist meditation, reading about Taoism and philosophy. He also read *Resurgence* magazine, produced by Schumacher College, which contained much wisdom but raised for him hard questions about the value of absolute pacifism. He was facing more and more difficult questions and finding little resolution. He felt the need for a spiritual underpinning to what he was doing. This is when he met, and started working with, Alastair McIntosh, with whom he wrote the book *Spiritual Activism: Leadership as Service*. To an extent there had always been a spiritual underpinning due to his background in Christianity, though since leaving the church he has not found his way to another organised spiritual community. He says that his spiritual underpinning now comes from living with an open heart to what is miraculous in the world, including in the natural world and in being a parent to young children.

Sharing thoughts with others about the need for a spiritual underpinning for their work in activism, led Matt to devise what he has called The Delta Course for people thirsting for meaning, to facilitate the sharing of stories and insights. Matt is currently reorganising materials which he devised for this course and will make it available to Unitarians in the near future.



# Rekindling the spirit of community – part one

At the Annual Meeting, on 4 April 2018, Matt Carmichael delivered the John Relly Beard lecture. The text will appear over three issues of *The Inquirer*.

How do we rekindle the spirit of Community? What IS real community?

The word gets bandied about a lot, doesn't it? There's a school shooting in the USA and 'the community' is in shock. You apply for a Lottery grant and you have to show how your project benefits 'the community'. The word 'community' gets applied to all kinds of not very community-minded people who share a special interest, among my favourites are regular media references to the online gaming 'community' and a website for the US gun lobby 'community'.

Is there such a thing as community? Or is it just a convenient but largely contentless word for lumping people in the same bracket? Has it become irrelevant in an age when the people I communicate with might be on the other side of the world, a facebook friend of a facebook friend?

Every year for 18 years I have taught GCSE English literature to at least one class. This invariably involves teaching JB Priestley's 1944 play *An Inspector Calls*.

If you don't know the play, it is set in 1912 in the home of the wealthy Birling family, who have gathered to celebrate the engagement of eldest daughter Sheila to the even wealthier Gerald Croft. A mysterious police inspector arrives uninvited and shatters their cosy illusions by eliciting from each of them confessions about how they have each treated a young, working-class woman called Eva Smith, leading her to destitution and finally suicide.

About five years ago I had a bottom-set student, Shane, who liked *An Inspector Calls*. Every lesson, before I'd finished asking, 'Who wants to read the part of the Inspector?' his hand shot up. I'd let him read it, and every lesson I'd have to give the part away because he'd argue with another student about something. He was excluded from school for fighting, but there were mitigating circumstances. I knew his dad hadn't been seen for years and his mum had an entrenched alcohol addiction. And I knew he was the one who got the evening meal for his younger brothers most days. The last time I saw him, about a year ago, he was playing the role of parent for the youngest of them at parents' evening.

But he liked the play. And he was one of those students whose intelligence is not fully recognised by our education system. He had plenty to say about it. When the central theme of community is explained as 'Everybody looking after everybody else,' my student pointed out that it's impossible to look after everybody else, and I thought, yeah, Shane's got his hands full just with his household. How must it feel to him to say he's somehow got to take responsibility for everyone else too?

Every year I explain to my students with no experience of church that when the inspector says, 'We are all members of one body,' that it's a quote everyone in post-war Britain would have recognised. And it's an image. It's the idea that together, people form something more than the sum of our parts, something that transcends our individuality.

Even though he was a shining example of it within his family, Shane struggled with this concept, so he got a really disappointing mark on a test. 'I just don't get how it works,' he said. It occurred to me that Shane probably had little experience of community. Who ever helped him? His teachers helped with lessons, but they were not a high priority for him. If there was no food, he went to the food bank. If there was no heating, he boiled the kettle for hot water bottles. If there was no bus money, he walked his brothers to their school, and came to his school late.

I got Shane to stay behind after a lesson and asked, 'What's the kindest thing anyone's ever done for you?' He thought and said, 'Brenda down our street got my mam a job at Tesco even though she knew she was on the bottle. She was a manager there so she just gave her the job and she tried to look out for her cos she thought it might help her stay on the wagon, and it would make life easier for me and my brothers. Didn't last, but it was worth a try.'

'So, Brenda did something kind for your mum, and did that make a difference to you?'

'Yeah, we had everything we needed for a while. Lecky bills paid, nice food.'

'Well I think that's what the inspector means about community being like a body.'

'Do you mean like that 'love your neighbour' thing?'

'Go on.'

'You know, love your neighbour. What's that from?'

'The Bible. Jesus.'

'Yeah, I knew it was religious. So if you love your neighbours then you're looking after everybody else however you can, like Brenda did for us. And then if everyone's doing that, it's like we're all joined up, all connected. I suppose it's a bit like the food bank, isn't it? People I've never met buying food for me and my mam and brothers. They might be like the heart, and I'm the little toe. I never see the heart but I wouldn't survive without it. We're connected.'

I love this story. It makes clear what we mean by community, and if Shane can get his head round it, so can we all.

Another thing is that it reveals the power of experience. Talking about community didn't work for Shane. What worked was asking Shane about his experience. If you want to teach the real meaning of community, you have to provide the experience of community, serving people's genuine needs.

Neighbours are the people you need. Shane couldn't understand Priestley's notion of community as kindness to others. It only clicked when he was asked to think about others meeting his needs.

Communities are where our human needs are attended to. Alastair McIntosh, the human ecologist, Scottish land reformer,



and co-author with me of *Spiritual Activism: Leadership as Service*, describes community in terms of three pillars: SOIL, SOUL and SOCIETY. I think of them as three types of fundamental human need. Meeting them builds community and, in turn, community meets these needs.

Soil is about our relationship with the Earth. We are part of an interdependent web of life. We need clean air and water. We need fertile soil to grow food. We need the invisible ozone layer to protect us from the sun's ultraviolet radiation. We need natural beauty. Everything we have and are comes from the Earth.

Soul is about our relationship with the divine, by whatever name. Whatever language we use – Buddha Nature; Brahman; Jah, Allah, Jung's 'Self' – we're talking about the source of life. It doesn't have to be religious thing, but to meet our deepest human needs it has to go beyond intellectual pursuits into the realms of the heart, the soul. In a sense, everything we have and are also comes from the divine.

Society is about relationships. In African culture, the core value of ubuntu captures the sense that our lives are not just intertwined, but that we are all part of each other's very being. The eco-philosopher Charles Eisenstein calls this 'interbeing'. In a sense, everything we have and are comes from, or at least, through, other people – our mothers give us life, our friends, family, teachers, colleagues and neighbours shape who we are, and the produce of others' work fills our homes and our bellies.

Healthy community meets human needs at every level. In 1977 Daniel Everett moved with his wife and three daughters to live in the Brazilian Amazon amongst the Piraha people. He hoped to learn their language, translate the New Testament into Piraha, and win their souls for Christ. Things did not go quite according to plan. The Piraha were resistant to conversion. Everett was confounded by the simplicity of their queries: Where exactly is heaven? If this Jesus is alive as you say, let him come to us and we will talk, then we will know if he has a straight head. They nearly fell off their chairs laughing when he tried to explain that he had not himself met Jesus in bodily form! And beyond his inadequate answers to their very empirical questions, he soon realised that the gospel he was offering provided a solution to problems the Piraha did not have in the first place.

They lived in harmony with their environment. Every child knew the names, habitats and properties of flora and fauna in the region. The rainforest provided, and they knew to take what they needed without upsetting the delicate ecosystems. They were so content that outsiders had given up trying to trade. The Piraha did not want what outsiders had to sell. The Piraha relationship with soil met their needs.

Piraha spirituality involved communal experiences of spirits that Everett was unable to perceive, but also unable to deny. They lived entirely in the present moment and had no past or future tense. There were few regrets about the past and no worries about the future. Peccadilloes were punished by a day of sulking, then forgotten. Life was filled with music, dancing and laughter – with soul.

Every Piraha society member was bound into relationships and roles crucial for survival and happiness – hunting, healing, child rearing, teaching, playing, leading rituals, and finding and preparing food. Everyone needed each other. So ingrained was the sense of interbeing that there were no personal pronouns in the Piraha language.

The more Everett observed the Piraha way of life, the more

he wished he were as happy and fulfilled as they were. He wished for their joy, their peace of mind. He questioned his own faith and wondered what he could learn from them.

One thing we can learn from them concerns what we humans really need. The Piraha way of community meets their needs for soil, soul and society, and avoids creating new or false needs. It is a totally sustainable society, a permaculture.

But community is never perfect, it's an ongoing project. The Piraha are no exception. In the early years Everett guarded his makeshift family home through the night when he misjudged their openness to his ideas. He offended them and was threatened. Once, there was a murder and the unrepentant culprit was banished from the community.

Even in a way of life sustained for millennia, such as Piraha society, the fire of community may burn low as the bonds of soil, soul or society are tested – and sometimes broken. My purpose is not to portray community as utopia. In coining that word, Thomas More made the same point in 1516. More spelled the name of his fantasy island 'Utopia', meaning 'no place'. More explains that the island's precise location was lost because someone coughed loudly when the exact latitude and longitude were announced. So More makes doubly clear that the perfect society exists nowhere.

Daniel Everett did not find the perfect community in the Piraha. But he did find one that didn't need his gospel. The Piraha were only fleetingly familiar with feelings of guilt or shame. There was little in the way of hierarchy. There was no currency – in fact, their language does not have numbers. Nothing is counted so there are no accounts. The Piraha were intimately familiar with the reality of death, and completely unthreatened by it. You could say they had eternal life in two ways. They lived in the eternal 'now' described by the philosopher Martin Buber. And they achieved sustainability such that their communal life, more meaningful to them than their individual existence, was eternal.

In short, the Piraha didn't need Everett's good news because they did not have our bad news.

The Brazilian government had achieved by guile what those motivated by money and religion had failed to achieve. Electricity had been provided free of charge along with televisions and flush toilets. Piraha society was rapidly changing. Children started to ask for toys they'd seen in adverts. Neighbours sat watching soaps in communal areas instead of talking. There was talk of introducing money.

Daniel Everett's own account of his time with the Piraha is *Don't Sleep There Are Snakes*, and the ABC/Arte France documentary *The Grammar of Happiness* tells more of the story.

In parts 2 and 3 of this lecture, which will be published in the next two editions of *The Inquirer*, Matt Carmichael explore some philosophical ideas behind the breakdown of community and how we can go about rebuilding it.

Matt Carmichael is a schoolteacher, writer, activist and dad from Leeds. He is co-author, with Alastair McIntosh, of *Spiritual Activism: Leadership as Service*.





# Social activism at New Unity

Tuesday morning, and four trestle tables are positioned along each side of New Unity's hall on Upper Street, Islington. At one end of the hall, there's another table, making nine in all. Behind each table sit a couple of people, mostly young, each with a laptop. In front of them sit their clients, mostly women. At the other end of the hall, by the stage, half a dozen preschool children play with toys, with Play Doh or Lego, or simply run around making a lot of noise and testing the patience and speed of their minders.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, two or three volunteers are preparing lunch for forty people from food donated by local shops and other businesses. Between the kitchen and the hall, somebody is making tea and coffee.

This is the weekly Unity Project, set up by New Unity to give specialist advice and intensive casework support to migrants who are experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness as a result of the government's 'no recourse to public funds' restriction on their leave to remain in the UK.

The project, staffed by volunteers, a director, and an immigration lawyer, provides support through solidarity, welcome, a hot lunch, childcare and baby supplies. The very antithesis to the government's 'hostile environment'.

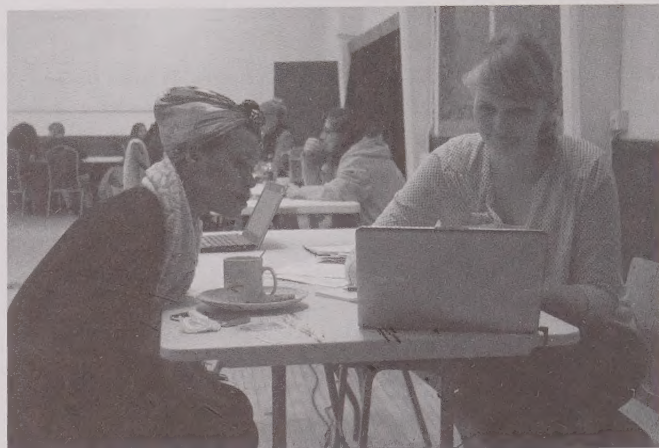
At other times in the week, the building hosts the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, a women-led LGBTQ+ inclusive mosque and where New Unity volunteers work with a new charity, Four Walls, to prepare and serve food to homeless people.

New Unity describes itself as a 'non-religious church' believing in justice and the power of love: a radically inclusive community of values and interconnection working towards a fairer, kinder world as part of the broader Unitarian movement. Just about the only doctrine that all the members share is to 'Believe in Good'.

Belief is one thing. Putting it into action is quite another. And, here, New Unity conducts myriad efforts that have real and positive results within the wider community. It does the 'good' in which it believes. But more than that, it looks for, and finds, the good in others. Most of the volunteers at the Unity Project, for instance, are not New Unity members.

Much of New Unity's work takes place through active, hands-on, support of the Hackney branch of Citizens UK. New Unity's minister, Rev Andy Pakula, is co-chair of Hackney Citizens' leadership group.

Just before the local elections on 3 May, the candidates standing for election as the Mayor of Hackney were invited



to an 'assembly' hosted by Citizens. Nearly five hundred local people were there to hear the outgoing, and subsequently re-elected, mayor finally promise to work with our Hackney Welcomes campaign to resettle a family of Syrian refugees, which had been stalled by his own council for months.

Campaigning through Citizens has contributed to significant changes in the same local authority's approach to property licensing, where tough new powers have just been introduced to deal with the borough's rogue landlords.

In both cases, members of New Unity were closely involved, as they have been in formulating and getting a commitment to support the adoption by local employers of a ground-breaking mental health charter.

From New Unity's 311-year-old meeting house on Newington Green, members reach out into the local community, campaigning to erect a statue to Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and a regular worshipper, and host Pets Against Loneliness, which brings together lonely adults and well-behaved pets.

Members are setting up a civil society alliance for the well-being of the area. Members of the Social Justice Team work on a nearby estate, where knife and drugs crime is a problem, to empower residents to make positive change.

Newington Green is where New Unity launched The Changemakers Hub, formed to support activists to create and grow local social justice initiatives, where a new lecture series, Voices of Dissent has been launched to ask the question, 'does it have to be like that?' After three centuries of radicalism, the church's taste for dissent is as sharp as ever.

It is where the entire Sunday collection is given to local charities, a different one each month; where people can talk about race and gender issues; and where nobody is judged.

And it is where, just before Christmas 2016, members brought and sorted clothes for the refugees stranded in Greece, where the weather was bitterly cold. One member put a twenty pound note in his pocket and went to the local market to buy some gloves, scarves and hats to send to Greece. When he told the stallholder why he was buying this stuff, he filled two large dustbin bags with his wares and handed them over. 'I was a refugee once,' the stallholder said. Believe in Good!

*David Brewerton is a member of New Unity's Social Justice Team.*





# Troublemakers? Who, us?

For the congregation of First Parish (Unitarian Universalist) in Bedford, Massachusetts, social justice is no mere tenet of faith

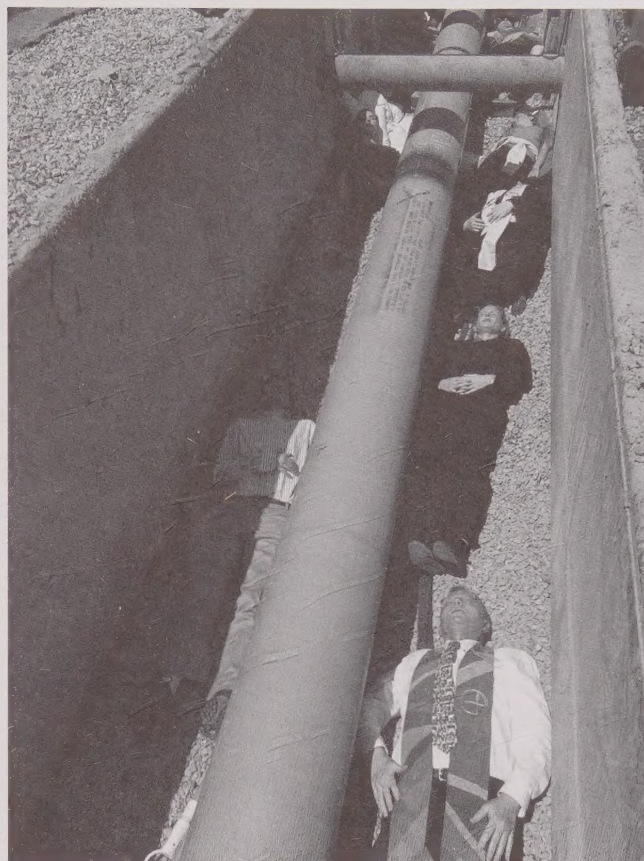
I've been asked to reflect on social activism in the church because the congregation I serve, the First Parish in Bedford, Massachusetts, has something of a trouble-making reputation. I'll tell you why, but first I must acknowledge that we've had that reputation for quite a while. For decades my predecessors, with the support and encouragement of the congregation, were active in movements for racial equality, peace, gender justice, and other progressive causes. Social justice is seen not as a discrete or optional hobbyhorse, but as a necessary and essential expression of liberal religious values.

Our church, I say, is not a sanctuary away from the world but a base camp from which we engage the larger world. That said, I must also say that not every minister or congregation will feel this way. Social activism is in the DNA of some ministers and churches, but not in all. It's important to note this because I have known some ministers who have tried to browbeat their congregations into activism, forcing progressive castor oil down their throats. Unsurprisingly, their parishioners recoil and gag. Another preliminary to note is that activism arises in congregations that are healthy. Activism is risky and seldom will everyone agree about every issue, strategy, or tactic. Activism is sustained when there is trust between ministers and congregants. Rather than urging one another to storm the barricades, activism may be more productively nurtured by cultivating congregational habits of care, concern, respect, even love. 'Justice,' says Cornel West, 'is what love looks like in public.'

One more thing that contributes to social activism in our churches is when ministers support the initiatives of their parishioners and when parishioners support – or are at least forbearing – of their ministers. Some ministers are kept on a short leash, micromanaged by their parishioners. This is a disincentive to activism. I suspect my congregation has me on a leash, but I am fortunate that it's a long one!

One of my predecessors was the late Jack Mendelsohn, an eminent spokesperson for our faith and a liberal lion. It is not an exaggeration to say that Jack did more than anyone else to make social action normative in our churches. He credited his ability to be outspoken not to his firebrand preaching or incisive political analysis but rather to his pastoral care. When people are heard and cared for, Jack knew, they are not only more tolerant of their minister's activism but they are more able and willing to engage in it themselves.

Sister Simone Campbell is an activist American nun. She describes the journey of faith as 'walking toward trouble' when most would run away. What trouble have we in Bedford walked toward? We are actively involved in movements for Black Lives Matter, international partnerships, LGBTQ rights, issues of disability and accessibility, the promotion of civil liberties and civics education, the MeToo movement and men's awareness, and we have initiatives that oppose mass incarceration, and support the UN and nuclear non-proliferation.



*John Gibbons and fellow protesters in a pipeline trench in Boston, Massachusetts. Photo by Peter Bowden*

We are active in efforts toward violence prevention and restorative justice, as well as academic initiatives to narrow racial disparities and the 'achievement gap'. Encouraging the activism of its congregations, the UUA has recognised us as a Green Sanctuary and EquUal Access congregation.

Because there is an air force base and a veterans hospital in Bedford, we have had the opportunity to support our veterans – not so much by being pro- or anti-war but by supporting community efforts to welcome and reintegrate our veterans, many of whom have trauma, and by simply telling the truth about American foreign policy and the true circumstances of military deployment. Twice we have hosted memorial services for young Bedford men killed in combat. These experiences have caused us to be less polemical, more pastoral, and more nuanced in our activism.

Climate justice is another major initiative. Environmentalist and 350.org founder Bill McKibben preached and challenged our members: 'You young people may not want an arrest record, but what excuse do the rest of you have?' In protest of fossil fuels, many of us have committed civil disobedience, the recidivist record now held by a thrice-arrested octogenarian! We give a modest stipend to a climate justice organiser who now foments activism among many congregations. The newest entry in our accounting ledger is an Acts of Conscience Fund. Bail money!

To reduce our own carbon footprint, many changes have been made to our building and air conditioning equipment. When we proposed installing solar panels on our 200-year-old

*(Continued on page 11)*



# Love where you live: this is how it starts ...

It is Sunday morning and I am not in church. This is still a new experience for me; and a strange experience. Instead of being in church I am in the streets, with a litter-picker in one hand and a bin bag in the other. I have joined a local litter-picking group supported by Keep Wales Tidy and I am meeting other people who don't go to church, but who gladly give up their Sunday mornings to make where they live a better place.

My job as a pioneer minister is to be with these people. My job is to build relationships with the 'unchurched' populations of this city, to be a citizen where I live, demonstrating my faith by committing to love where I live.

But what is the point of it? Am I trying to grow our church in Cardiff? Am I inviting people to come along to our afternoon service? Well, no. I am not trying to grow our church. I am not trying to fill up pews. I am not trying to get people to come to services. I am not trying to get people to come to events, to coffee mornings, meditation or discussion groups.

I'm not trying to grow the church. Why not? Because in not trying to grow a church I am forced to get to the naked, vulnerable heart of the matter. I am forced to be out in the world spiritually naked, without any of the usual clothings of ministry.

In not trying to grow the church I have to discover what my faith is, what our faith is, what our good news is, because that is all I have. All I have is faith. And I have to start with faith, rather than starting with church.

For the next two years or three years we are running an experiment in evangelism: what happens when all you have is faith? When all you have is good news? What happens when you take that faith, that good news into the mystery, mess, wonder, and chaos of a large modern city?

What is that faith? What is that I actually think I'm trying to do? As a pioneer minister I do need to be able to answer that question. All I have is faith, and if I don't have that, I can't do my job. I have found that as a pioneer minister my first priority has to be prayer. I need to be deeply rooted in a rhythm of prayer that roots my life and work. For me, being a pioneer minister is an act of complete trust in God. I find the job before me too big. I know I can't do it by myself. I can only do it, trusting in the power of God. I can only do it if I believe that faith is in fact what the world needs most urgently. And I do.

As Paul Razor at the Annual Meetings told us, we live in a neoliberal society. This means a society that believes that competition is the defining characteristic of human relationships; that society is a market, not a community; that we are consumers, not citizens, and not children of God. It is a society based on the values of extreme individualism, greed, and competitiveness.

This ideology, that has come to dominate us since the 1980s, is killing us. It makes us dissatisfied, miserable, and isolated from each other. It asks us to put more and more trust in our possessions and less and less in each other. And it creates an epidemic of loneliness and bad mental health.

Not only that, it is destroying our natural environment as constant consumption drives the wheels of a system that spews out carbon dioxide and is leading us into a climate catastrophe.

The global problem of the twenty-first century is climate change: an urgent and massive problem that nevertheless develops slowly enough for us to be able to ignore it. But if we ignore it until it's really noticeable in an everyday sense, it will be too late. Human activity, pushed on by the ideology of neoliberalism, is creating massive shifts in the climate that will cause untold misery and death to billions of people and millions of other species on earth. Right now we are living through a mass extinction event equivalent to the one that killed the dinosaurs.

Scientists keep telling us about this, but there's only so much scientists can do. Gus Speth, an environmental lawyer, has said, 'I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy ... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don't know how to do that.'

Scientists don't know how to do that. But guess who does know how to do that? Religion does. Faith does.

This idea has been taken up by American Unitarian Universalist minister Ian White Maher. He has argued convincingly that the climate crisis is ultimately a spiritual crisis. It's not a problem that can be solved by more and better technology – that is the kind of thinking that caused the problem in the first place. Rather it is a problem that must be addressed by a kind of a twelve-step approach.

In Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programmes you have to admit you are powerless over the problem – that your life has become unmanageable; and you have to trust a Power greater than yourself to restore you to sanity. Ian White Maher says that in order to address the spiritual crisis that is causing the climate crisis, we must confess our need for help from something greater.

'The first step towards a solution is to admit that we are beyond the point of avoiding calamitous climate change ... The second step is admitting that we need help. Specifically ... humanity needs help from the divine and creative life force that is greater than the selfish interests of our individual egos. Anything shy of this confession will leave us with the illusion that we will somehow, through our own power and ingenuity, solve the problem. But we cannot solve a spiritual problem with intellectual solutions.'

We need nothing less than confession and conversion. We need religion. We need more religion, not less religion. Religion is the only thing with the proven ability to cause massive cultural and spiritual shifts, to transform human beings and their values, and we need nothing less than this. We need to change how we live, how we think, what we value. We need to find meaning and satisfaction in life in





*Challenging the earth-destroying culture: Stephen Lingwood joins the Sunday-morning litter pickers in Cardiff*

something other than earning money and buying things and expensive experiences.

It's a challenging idea, but I have become convinced of it.

I think this really challenges us as Unitarians. I think, frankly, we no longer have the luxury to be only about a wishy-washy liberalism that says, 'Well maybe this or maybe not, we don't know.' We no longer have the luxury to be about every person pursuing their individual personalised spiritual journey. Indeed, I increasingly see that kind of approach as part of the problem, not the solution.

The great danger for Unitarianism is that it simply becomes the church of neoliberalism. A church that preaches individualism and makes spirituality into a 'product' personalised to our own whims and tastes to be 'consumed'. The danger is that Unitarianism becomes exactly the kind of religion that re-enforces neoliberalism and climate change, rather than fights against it.

But as Susan Frederick-Gray, the new President of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States, has said: this is no time for casual faith.

This is no time for a faith that just copies our consumerist, individualist culture; this is no time for a faith that is casual, wishy-washy, or uncommitted. Spiritual transformation cannot happen if we are just a watered-down version of religion. We need more religion, not less. Religion that addresses the spiritual crisis that is causing the climate crisis.

That spiritual crisis is ultimately alienation. Neoliberalism makes us alienated, isolated, cut off from each other and from the source of life. Neoliberalism makes us spiritually, psychologically, politically, economically, and ecologically alienated.

But it's a lie! The truth, the spiritual truth our tradition stands for, is that we are deeply connected within an interdependent web of existence – but we must awaken to this reality. We must restore a sacred relationship to our planet and all that is.

In 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed a class of newly qualified Unitarian ministers, and he told them that their mission was to acquaint people first-hand with Deity. That remains exactly what my pioneer ministry is about. It is my mission to help people realise and to live as if

the fundamental reality of the universe is relationship, not isolation.

We are not alone, but part of a mysterious reality, a Power greater than ourselves, that holds us all together in a greater Oneness. And we can't save the world, and we can't save ourselves, by going it alone, but we have to feel and experience for ourselves this sacred relationship; to realise through worship and prayer that we are part of a mystical reality of Oneness, and that we are all held within an embrace of Love. I call that reality God. God as both the One it is possible to enter into relationship with, and the Relationship itself with all that is. But this is not something to believe, but something to experience.

My mission is not to grow Unitarianism. My mission is to help people experience Sacred Relationship, and to find fulfilment in relationship, in connection, in community; not in competing, and consuming, individualism, and apathy.

I believe religious community is one of the places where this can happen. But I'm starting with the mission, and seeing what community can grow out of that mission, rather than starting with the community and trying to get people to attend to ensure institutional survival.

I'm not concerned with the institutional survival of Unitarianism. Ultimately I'm concerned with the survival of the human race and the planet. And I'm concerned with creating communities of resistance to our earth-destroying culture. I'm concerned with making disciples committed to spiritual practices that resist neoliberalism and alienation, and create deeper experiences of sacred relationship. I'm concerned with making disciples of Love committed to sacred activism.

One of those practices, for now, is simply picking up litter in my inner-city street. But this is how it starts. Not, as Mother Teresa said, doing great things, but doing small things with great love. That's how we build the resistance.

*Stephen Lingwood is  
a Pioneer Minister with  
Cardiff Unitarians /  
Undodiaid Caerdydd*





# Marching, travelling, dancing

Yes, I know not to judge a book by its cover, but *Long Road from Jarrow* was an irresistible title. Journalist and broadcaster Stuart Maconie is an engaging, sometimes provocative writer, and any mention of Jarrow immediately associates readers with just one thing, the 300-mile march, or more correctly 'crusade' undertaken by 200 men in the autumn of 1936. Maconie decided to mark the anniversary of this highly symbolic event, precisely eighty years on. He retraced the walk, reliving the experience of the protesters against the grim conditions in 'the town that was murdered'. Along the way the marchers were fed, entertained and accommodated, with various degrees of welcome, by the towns and villages through which they marched to the music of their harmonicas. Some townsfolk repaired or replaced the men's boots. Others provided clean socks and underwear. Meanwhile, Edward Windsor's relationship with Wallis Simpson was troubling royalist hearts. A good read, comparing then with now.

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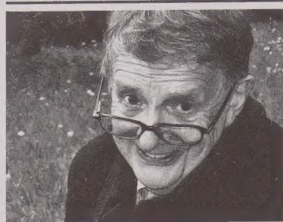
It's just as unwise to judge a film by its title, but who can resist *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*? Film of the book, it is dismissed by some critics as romantic and lightweight. I was gripped by its reminders of the appalling privations and suffering of Guernsey folk during WW2. Many of their children had been evacuated and were out of touch. The Society, a Friday night book club, became a refuge during the five years of occupation. A visiting writer, soon after the liberation, uncovered stories of grief, heroism and treachery. Our local cinema helpfully handed us a souvenir booklet which included a recipe for potato peel pie, albeit an improved version, not what was eaten by the desperate islanders. I haven't tasted it yet, but as one who really likes potatoes, I'll give it a try.

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A visit to an altogether different island was recently enjoyed by Bradford Unitarians, David and Christine Dawson, who recently toured Sicily. They noted that among the stunningly beautiful scenery and numerous sites of historical interest, visitors can also see the locations of the film *The Godfather*. Still listed as one of the top 100 movies of all time, it is certainly among my favorites for its gritty realism and brilliant performances by Marlon Brando and Al Pacino. I read somewhere that in 2017 Archbishop Pennisi of Monreale decreed that no Mafia members attending ptisms should be allowed to take on the role of the child's spiritual guide. Pennisi is trying to reclaim the word 'godfather' for the Church, saying that it has lost its religious respectability. He introduced this ban, at some personal risk I would think, after learning that a parish priest in the town of Corleone (which inspired the surname of the fictional mob family in *The Godfather*) made a Mafia boss his niece's godfather.

Probably for altogether different reasons there is a growing fashion here in the UK for parents to appoint 'guide-parents' rather than godparents. Use of the word 'God' troubles many of those who call themselves 'spiritual rather than religious', including some Unitarians and even Quakers at their recent Yearly Meeting, we hear.

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## Funny Old World

By John Midgley

My own recent holiday-making has been a spring break in France. If Jarrow immediately brings thoughts of the crusade of 1936 and Sicily makes one think of the Mafia, then Avignon surely suggests the song, *Sur le Pont d'Avignon*, about the town's bridge. Strolling towards it, I couldn't help singing it to myself, in my residual schoolboy French. Various described and translated, sometimes as a children's song, sometimes a wedding song it dates back to the fifteenth century. The bridge is officially Pont St Bénézet, but it is better known as the Pont d'Avignon on which one dances, as the song says:

On the bridge of Avignon  
We all dance there, we all dance there  
On the bridge of Avignon  
We all dance there in a circle.

Our teacher taught us that the dancing originally took place under the bridge and not on it (*Sous le Pont d'Avignon*, not *Sur*). In time, the thought of dancing under it ceased to make sense so the words mutated from 'under' to 'on'. It's a handsome bridge, though now simply a tourist attraction as a large section of it was washed away in a flood many years ago.

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Close by stands the Chateau Neuf du Pape, the 'New Castle of the Pope', built in the fourteenth century for Pope John XXII, the second of the popes to reside in Avignon. This is a complex period of the history of the Catholic church, with dangerous schisms between the competing families claiming the succession to the papacy. Rome became an unsafe place and the pope decamped to Avignon. Only the cynical would suggest that he was attracted by the wine of the area. There were even popes referred to as 'the antipope', often with a considerable following, so for some years there was more than one pope. The castle is a large, complex series of buildings, used over the centuries for various purposes, now a tourist attraction. The town itself is lively and friendly, best seen from a trip on the 'Noddy train'. I was intrigued to see, right outside the main gate of the chateau, Jehovah's Witnesses with their publicity stand. I decided against a copy of *The Watchtower*. My schoolboy French isn't nearly good enough and I think I have a fair idea of what they make of both popes and antipopes.

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We couldn't leave, however, without a traditional dance on the bridge. I'm persuaded that the original version of 'under' rather than 'on' is correct. The walkway is narrow and cobbled, hardly suitable for dancing, but we gave it a go. Dancing under it today would be dangerous. The part across the land has traffic speeding through it, and as our travel guide warned us, 'French motorists don't have driving licences, they have hunting licences!' *D'accord!*

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired minister.*



# Another midweek success



The Meditational Fellowship (TMF) had its second midweek retreat, 24–26 April, at Sarum College in Salisbury, within the beautiful setting of the Cathedral Close. The programme included a blend of meditation and interactive sessions, set to expand our understanding and abilities, and to encourage debate, and the chance to ask questions and exchange ideas. It was a fruitful three days, even if you included the walking meditation that found those taking part soaked to the skin as the heavens opened halfway round, but even that didn't

dampen the pleasure gained from the company of friends old and new. It seems that midweek retreats are here to stay. The next midweek retreat is in Salisbury, 7–9 May 2019.

Our next weekend retreat in July at Grasmere, Cumbria, is fully booked, but you would be welcome to try a weekend with us, 2–4 November in Salisbury. For booking forms contact Alf Withington: [alfwithington@gmail.com](mailto:alfwithington@gmail.com) or 01942 733553.

*Alf Withington is a member of  
The Meditational Fellowship.*

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## Troublemakers? Who, us?

*(Continued from page 7)*

roof, however, the municipal Historic District Commission turned us down. We did not take no for an answer and filed a lawsuit in court, asserting solar panels as a form of religious expression and the HDC decision as unjustified. Indeed, we filed suit against one of our own members, the HDC chair being a parishioner! Did I mention that activism is risky? We have a bumper sticker: Well Behaved Churches Seldom Make History. We are not always well-behaved, and we do hope to make history.

We are not always antagonists. Just today I walked to Town Hall to present a modest cheque of \$1,000 to our town government, a so-called PILOT payment, 'payment in lieu of services'. US non-profits, including churches, are exempt from local taxes and yet we are beneficiaries of public safety, education, and other municipal services. A voluntary PILOT payment is not an act of social justice, but it signifies our intent to be socially responsible members of our community and commonwealth, 'a spiritual centre with a civic circumference'.

Two years ago, after a lengthy period of study and discernment, we adopted a congregational resolution in support of The New Sanctuary Movement. Subsequently, we voted in near-unanimity to be a physical sanctuary for undocumented immigrants. (There was a lone dissenter in our congregational vote. Immediately, we awarded her a Profile in Courage Award for her willingness to be a minority of one!)

Immigration officials have a policy not to seize people at houses of worship. Thus we offer safety to those who fear deportation and buy time for their legal appeal. A courageous Guatemalan woman has now been living with us for more

than four months. Her husband and eldest son have been deported, leaving school-age children living alone. The American government, she says, 'is taking my family apart one by one.' We see such policies as unconscionable and morally reprehensible. Two volunteers are present in our building 24/7 to protect our guest, and more than 300 volunteers have been trained. We do our best to support our guest and her family. Ten congregations, including two Jewish congregations, have covenanted to support us. To have someone's life in one's hands makes real our faith commitment to be wide in our welcome. There has been an outpouring of moral and practical support from our larger community, including cheques from strangers, to assist with the considerable expenses.

Recently we have begun spiritual-deepening gatherings for our volunteers and parishioners to reflect on the moral meanings of giving sanctuary. One theme emerged: people value doing something with their bodies to express their resistance to injustice and to literally embody their liberal religious values. This is a common thread to all our initiatives: Social justice is not a mere tenet of our faith; it is an embodiment of religious living. Social justice is not about being liberal, conservative, or radical. It is not about political party. It is not even about being theologically progressive. In these perilous, dispiriting, and often frightening times, to embody social justice is to recall our moral imperatives, that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. And sometimes to make some trouble, too.

*The Rev John Gibbons is Senior Minister with First Parish  
(Unitarian Universalist) Bedford, Massachusetts.*



# Work shall be prayer: a Peace Pole for Lewisham Unitarians

Lewisham Unitarians marked the 120th anniversary of the founding of our congregation with the creation of our own Peace Pole, with the prayerful message 'May Peace Prevail on Earth' in eight languages: English, French, Hindi, Farsi, Amharic (Ethiopia), Yoruba, Luganda (Uganda), and Tigrinya (Eritrea). We planted this heavy post in our front garden as an offering to our neighbourhood and the world passing by our gate.

It's possible to order a Peace Pole ready-made, but the beautiful wooden ones are expensive and their limited selection of languages could not accommodate our needs. So we made our own, by ordering custom language decals from the US office of the Peace Pole Project, a 3m long green oak post, and four acrylic panels long enough to display two decals each, to carry the eight languages.

At last, our garden is getting some loving attention and being appreciated for the incredible and unique asset it is, and the offering that it could be, and will be. It will become an important part of what we do as Unitarians in our neighbourhood, as we use our imagination and energy to recommit to our premises, to rejuvenate and populate our sacred space of encounter and possibility.

At the end of the service on Easter Sunday our minister, Rev Claire MacDonald, led us all outside to bless and dedicate the finished Peace Pole. It has been a joy to



work hard together in the sun and fresh air, to hear the encouragement of passing neighbours, and to have the company of robins darting about.

For more details on Lewisham's Peace Pole and advice on making your own, email Lori Winters at [lumhcommittee@gmail.com](mailto:lumhcommittee@gmail.com). Donations to our garden project will be gratefully accepted.

*Lori Winters is a member of Lewisham Unitarians.*

## Alternative Wedding Fair at York's St Saviourgate

Dee Boyle, a member of York Unitarians, went to a wedding that had cost a bomb. It was lovely, but...

In her work as Authorised Person and Celebrant at York Unitarians' St Saviourgate Chapel, she had often spoken to couples who had delayed their wedding because of the costs involved. She felt that we should be offering people an opportunity to see how you can have a lovely wedding on a shoestring, by crafting your table decorations, buying a preloved dress and by using items from charity shops. So she organised an Alternative Wedding Fair at our historic chapel in St Saviourgate.

Our local Oxfam shop has a specialised bridal section, and they put on a fashion show twice during the day. Our local environmental organisation, St Nicks, came along to talk about the best ways to recycle, reuse and repair. Local business Ducks and Daffodils had a magnificent display of seasonal flowers and showed how they could be turned into bouquets, flower arrangements and buttonholes.

We had a table of our own home-made and recycled items for sale. Old spice jars had become flower vases, jam jars and wine bottles were now candle holders, hair accessories were revamped and made suitable for bridesmaids, and those were just a few of the items on offer.

We hoped to publicise our licence to solemnise same-sex marriages and our openness to diversity. We wanted people to know we could work with interfaith couples as well, and get the message out that we can work with couples to create a wedding service that is meaningful to them.

How did it all go? It was a beautiful, warm day, but we just didn't get the footfall the businesses in particular were hoping for. We are a bit tucked away. But there was a lovely feel, due to Dee's hard work setting everything up.

The environmental charity had some good conversations and we have received a booking for a wedding. One lady said she was interested in Unitarianism and planned to come to a service, while I chatted to a couple of guys who were looking for a wedding venue. So not at all bad.

Several of the participants want to have another go. It may well be in a different venue and we would need to get a better hang of social media and advertising, but it was a very creditable first go and supports our ethos of helping people and the environment.

*The Rev Nicky Jenkins is minister with York Unitarians.*